

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-14

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INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-02 PRS-01 SP-02

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INFO AMEMBASSY CARACAS

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PGOV, NA

SUBJECT: CONSULAR OFFICER S VISIT TO ARUBA

1. SUMMARY: THE MOST NOTABLE EFFECT OF THE RECENT AIRPORT CLOSING AND DISTURBANCES ASSOCIATED WITH GILBERTO "BETICO" CROES STRUGGLE FOR AN INDEPENDENT ARUBA IS A DRAMATIC DROP IN THE NUMBER OF TOURISTS VISITING THE ISLAND. ALTHOUGH MANY HOTEL MANAGERS ARE CONFIDENT THAT, IF THE SITUATION REMAINS CALM, THE RECENT DISTURBANCES WILL SOON BE FORGOTTEN BY THE TRAVELING PUBLIC, THERE IS AN UNDERLYING CURRENT OF FEAR THAT BETICO S FUTURE ACTIONS MAY PERMANENTLY CRIPPLE ARUBA S ESSENTIAL TOURIST INDUSTRY. END SUMMARY.

2. ONE WEEK AFTER THE ARUBA AIRPORT REOPENED FOR NORMAL BUSINESS THE ONLY VISIBLE REMINDER OF THE RECENT DISTURBANCES ON THE ISLAND IS THE PRESENCE OF THE PARTIALLY ASSEMBLED BARRICADES THAT SURROUNDED THE POLICE HEADQUARTERS. LIFE APPEARS TO HAVE RETURNED TO NORMAL, WITH BUSINESSES OPEN AND THE ELECTRICITY OPERATING. HOWEVER, THE LOBBIES OF ARUBA S LARGE RESORT HOTELS ARE MISSING THE CRUSH OF AMERICAN TOURISTS NORMALLY PRESENT EVEN IN THIS LOW SEASON.

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3. CONVERSATIONS WITH SEVERAL HOTEL OWNERS AND MANAGERS REVEALED THAT DURING THE PAST WEEK THE RESORT HOTELS HAVE SUFFERED 30- TO 60- PERCENT CANCELLATIONS OF CONFIRMED BOOKINGS. ALL THE MAJOR HOTELS WILL END THE MONTH WITH ROOM OCCUPANCY RATES AS MUCH AS FIFTY PERCENT BELOW EXPECTATIONS.

MOST OF THE CANCELLATIONS HAVE RESULTED FROM THE DIVERSION

OF GROUP CHARTERS AND GAMBLING JUNKETS BY NERVOUS OPERATORS TO OTHER CARIBBEAN RESORTS, INCLUDING ARUBA S POOR SISTER IN THE TOURIST TRADE, CURACAO. THE INDIVIDUAL TOURIST ON THE OTHER HAND, SEEMS TO BE UNAWARE OF OR HAVE ALREADY FORGOTTEN ARUBA S RECENT PROBLEMS. AMERICAN AIRLINES LOAD FACTOR ON ITS NEW YORK/ARUBA FLIGHT HAD RETURNED TO NORMAL BY AUGUST 21, AND THE FLIGHTS ON THE 23RD AND 24TH WERE COMPLETELY FULL.

4. THE AIRLINES AND HOTELS ARE CONFIDENT THAT, IF THERE ARE NO FURTHER UNTOWARD ACTIONS BY CROES, THE AUGUST DISTURBANCES WILL HAVE LITTLE OR NO EFFECT ON THE UPCOMING WINTER SEASON. ALTHOUGH SOME CANCELLATIONS HAVE BEEN RECEIVED FOR OCTOBER OR NOVEMBER BOOKINGS, THERE HAVE BEEN NO CANCELLATIONS FOR THE VERY BUSY CHRISTMAS HOLIDAY PERIOD OR BEYOND. THE MEMBERS OF THE HOTEL ASSOCIATION ARE PREPARING A U.S. DIRECTED PUBLIC RELATIONS CAMPAIGN TO OFFSET ANY POSSIBLE LONG-TERM DAMAGE THE DISTURBANCES MAY HAVE CAUSED ARUBA S "FRIENDLY PEOPLE, ISLAND IN THE SUN" IMAGE. BUT THE PUBLIC RELATIONS CAMPAIGN AND THE HOPES FOR A GOOD WINTER SEASON SUFFER FROM THE UNCERTAINTY SURROUNDING BETICO CROES NEXT STEP IN HIS CAMPAIGN FOR ARUBAN INDEPENDENCE.

5. THE PROMISING WINTER SEASON AND THE FUTURE OF ARUBA AS A MAJOR TOURIST RESORT COULD EASILY BE DESTROYED BY A RENEWAL OF THE RECENT DISTURBANCES, PARTICULARLY IF VIOLENCE WERE INVOLVED. THE HOTEL ASSOCIATION IS WORKING DESPERATELY TO

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FORSTALL ANY ACTIVITY BY BETICO CROES AND MEP THAT COULD POSSIBLY DAMAGE THE TOURIST TRADE. DURING THE PAST WEEK THE ASSOCIATION HAS MET DAILY WITH CROES, OTHER MEP OFFICIALS, THE LT. GOVERNOR, AND PPA OFFICIALS IN AN EFFORT TO KEEP ARUBA S PROBLEMS OFF THE STREET. THE ASSOCIATION S OFFER TO ACT AS MEDIATOR BETWEEN MEP AND PPA HAS SO FAR NOT BEEN ACCEPTED BY EITHER PARTY. IN A MEETING WITH THE ASSOCIATION, CROES ASSURED THE MEMBERS THAT THERE WOULD NOT BE A REPETITION OF THE AIRPORT CLOSING, COMMUNICATIONS DISRUPTION, POWER SHUTDOWN OR PUBLIC DISTURBANCES OF EARLY AUGUST.

CROES ASSURANCES DID NOT EASE THE HOTEL ASSOCIATION S CONCERNS, HOWEVER. DISTRUST OF THE MAN HAS ACTUALLY MADE MOST MEMBERS MORE APPREHENSIVE THAN EVER ABOUT HIS PLANS FOR THE IMMEDIATE FUTURE. THEY BELIEVE, AND KNOW HE BELIEVES, THAT HE MUST EITHER WIN, WHICH IS UNLIKELY, OR ESCALATE HIS CAMPAIGN OF DESRUPTION.

PENBERTHY

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